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AN ASSESSMENT OF SHAKA ZULU  
IN TERMS OF CLAUSEWITZIAN  
AND SUN TSUAN THEORIES

CORE COURSE 5602 ESSAY

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## Introduction

In expressing their views on the nature and conduct of war, Clausewitz and Sun Tzu factor in the human element more so than some other military theorists. Their treatment of the impact of human factors is laudable, especially as it relates to the commanding general. While neither theorist is prescriptive in terms of a cookbook for military strategy, they both, rather abstractly, describe the ingredients of war and their interrelationship. This paper assesses Clausewitzian and Sun Tzuian principles of war as they apply to Shaka of the Zulu, the South African warrior and chief, with particular emphasis on his greatness or military genius.

## Background

Shaka of the Zulu was born sometime between 1785 and 1787, five to seven years after Carl von Clausewitz and died in 1828, three years before Clausewitz. Shaka, as was customary with Mthethwa males of a certain age, was placed in an initiation age-regiment from which those in their late teens were called into national service. In these regiments, they received military training, tended the king's cattle, kept the huts in good order, took part in organized hunts, and attended various ceremonial gatherings. Shaka gained prominence and recognition for his intellect and fighting skills. As a result of his military victories, he was named regimental commander by the chief of the Mthethwa, Dingiswayo, who took Shaka and his mother into his clan when the two were exiled from his mother's.

“From the start of his military career with the Mthethwa, Shaka was openly critical of the old way of fighting, believing that it was highly inefficient for two armies to line up

about 50 paces apart and to throw spears and abuse at each other until one of them lost heart.”<sup>1</sup> With the advent of the stabbing spear Shaka revolutionized military tactics. He envisioned the ability to perform close in combat with this invention, however, shields, which he created, for sheltering the whole body were needed. He devised the Zulu attack formation which he called the bull and horns whereby a strong body, usually composed of senior warriors, made a frontal assault on the enemy, while the horns, composed of young warriors rushed out on either side.<sup>2</sup> This close combat tactic was so successful that it was adopted throughout the land and was the main offensive tactic employed by the Zulu for the next 60 years. In fact the bull and horns formation successfully defeated the British in the battle of Isandlwana in 1879.

Unlike his predecessors, Shaka believed in universal conscription, promotion based on merit as opposed to the traditional family member ascending to rank, centralized authority, and rigorous training. Because he felt that the sandals worn by his warriors hindered their mobility and speed, it is said that Shaka trained them in their bare feet and toughened their feet to withstand the terrain. According to Ian Knight:

Shaka's spy system was legendary and he seldom embarked on a campaign without thoroughly assessing the strength, disposition and, if possible, intentions of his enemy. He was an able strategist and inspired tactician, a ruthless and aggressive commander who was never afraid to strike hard and fast, and who had an instinctive grasp of fieldcraft which enabled him to turn the terrain to his advantage. When, in later years, he no longer took to the field himself, he shared his plans with only his most trusted commanders.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reader's Digest, *Illustrated History of South Africa* (USA: Reader's Digest, 1988) 33

<sup>2</sup> Ian Knight, *Warrior Chiefs of Southern Africa* (United Kingdom: Firebird Books, 1994) 18

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 44

War for Shaka was lethal and unlimited. He believed that unless an enemy capitulated completely and showed absolutely no spirit for battle they should be totally annihilated.<sup>4</sup> In his quest to expand the Zulu nation, his enemies were either killed, subjugated or just driven away. By the mid-1820's, Shaka had established control over the Natal territory from the Pongola River in the North, to beyond the Tugela River in the south and the Drakensberg mountain escarpment to the sea.<sup>5</sup> He accomplished what no other chief in the region could. Shaka created a powerful, centralized militaristic kingdom.

### **The Nature and Conduct of War**

Sun Tzu and Clausewitz both viewed war as a continuation of policy by other means. In Shaka's case, his political object was to expand his territory. As did leaders of European and other nations, Shaka used war as the primary means to achieve this objective. Whereas Sun Tzu and Clausewitz regarded the military as always subordinate to policy, the line blurred when Shaka became chief of the Zulu. For Shaka the nature of war was lethal and total which, in this respect, aligns him more closely with Clausewitz. However, in examining the conduct of war, Shaka's strategy and tactics reside with both theorists. His practice of close combat and mass concentration of troops are Clausewitzian in nature, however his reliance on intelligence, deception and surprise, and the indirect approach is clearly Sun Tzuian. Regarding offense and defense, like Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, Shaka recognized the strength of defense and employed it only

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<sup>4</sup> James Langa, Shaka (Salisbury: Longman Zimbabwe (PVT) Ltd, 1992) 18

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Thompson, A History of South Africa (Westford, Massachusetts: Murray Printing Co., 1990) 83

when warranted, however, to achieve his goals he realized the value of offense. All three men emphasized maneuver and speed

### **Clausewitz on Military Genius**

A genius as defined by the Random House College Dictionary is a person who strongly influences for good or ill the character, conduct, or destiny of a person, place or thing. The essence of military genius, according to Clausewitz is a combination of intellect (or the gifts of mind) and temperament. It encompasses courage, strength of body and soul, coup de oeil, determination, presence of mind, energy, staunchness, strength of mind or character, firmness, and the faculty to grasp topography.<sup>6</sup> These attributes are useful in supporting both strategic and tactical objectives. Clausewitz further stipulates that "...we will never find a savage who is a truly great commander, and very rarely one who would be considered a military genius, since this requires a degree of intellectual powers beyond anything that a primitive people can develop."<sup>7</sup> I will examine each of these points to demonstrate how Shaka meets Clausewitz' criteria for genius, and thereby refute his assertion which restricts military genius to civilized societies.

According to Clausewitz, courage is the first requirement of a soldier and may be a permanent condition, characterized as an indifference to danger, or a non-permanent condition, described as a feeling or emotion resulting from ambition, patriotism or enthusiasm of any kind. Shaka's courage was most assuredly a permanent condition which not only manifested itself in battle but in his concept of close combat. Without

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<sup>6</sup> Carl von Clausewitz *On War* ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976) 100-110.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 100.

courage, it is inconceivable to me that his concept of close combat would have been acted upon. His strength of body and soul is seen in the rigorous training demanded of himself and his troops. Of particular note is the shedding of their sandals to harden their feet for sure-footedness and speed in battle.

The next three components of military genius, *coup de oeil*, determination, and presence of mind, pertain to the ability to quickly recognize and sort through conflicting data when faced with difficult or unforeseen events, to make a decision and follow through on it, and to be resourceful in the face of danger. Though very few hard facts about the battle of Gqokli Hill are known since it took place early in his career, it serves to illustrate Shaka's possession of the aforementioned attributes. The unforeseen death of the Mthethwa leader Dingiswayo (at the hands of his arch rival, Zwide), genuinely shocked Shaka, however, he was aware of the political and strategic implications.<sup>8</sup> "The whole of the Mthethwa confederacy was up for grabs. What's more with the Mthethwa demoralized and confused, only Shaka's army stood between Zwide and mastery of the heart of Zululand."<sup>9</sup> Outnumbered two to one, Shaka organized his army first in a defensive position using the bull and horns formation, then deployed advance parties to delay and disrupt the Ndwandwe assault. After a series of frontal assaults by the Ndwandwe, it is said that they formed into a column to try and punch a hole in the Zulu defenses, and Shaka struck with his reserve forces.

Shaka's legendary feats attest to his level of energy and staunchness in battle. Energy results from that which motivates a soldier to act in battle. Staunchness refers to

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<sup>8</sup> Knight 21  
<sup>9</sup> Ibid

resistance and endurance. The Battle of Gqokli Hill resulted in a stalemate because Shaka resisted the initial Ndwandwean offensive and endured their subsequent attacks in spite of being outnumbered. Throughout his military career Shaka exhibited firmness, the ability to stick to his convictions. He truly believed that his bull and horns formation was better than the traditional way of fighting and therefore had to convince others of its merit. His grasp of topography aided him in the decisive battle with the Ndwandwe. As the Ndwandwe advanced into Zulu territory, Shaka fell back, taking his herds and grain with him, since the Ndwandwe were foragers and expected to survive in enemy territory by looting Zulu grain stores and cattle.<sup>10</sup> Refusing to engage them in heavy battles, Shaka drew them further and further into Zulu territory across some of the most rugged terrain of Zululand where the Ndwandwe were finally defeated.

Strength of mind or character entails self-control in times of exceptional stress and violent emotion. This may be the weakest of all of Shaka's assets since by nature he was short tempered. However, unlike the rampant and senseless destruction (Mfecane) he instigated following the death of his mother, when Dingiswayo was murdered, Shaka seized the opportunity to unify the Mthethwa with the Zulu.

Clausewitz and Shaka were contemporaries. In all probability he was unaware of Shaka's feats since Shaka rose to power in 1818 and Clausewitz wrote his book between 1816 and 1818. On War reflects Clausewitz' thoughts based on his experiences and observations to that point. Unless blinded by individual prejudices, Shaka of the Zulu must be acknowledged for his military genius. Even without Shaka as an example, I fundamentally disagree with Clausewitz' statement that "... we will never find a savage

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Ibid 24

who is a truly great commander since this requires a degree of intellectual powers beyond anything that a primitive people can develop " Greatness and genius are both relative terms They are attained only in comparison to some norm, therefore I maintain that within the context of any group or society one can find someone with the intellect who by far exceeds the norms and in turn has a revolutionary effect on some part of the group or society

### **Sun Tzu on Commanding Generals**

Sun Tzu regards the commander as all-knowing especially as this relates to the enemy For a general to be successful he needs wisdom, credibility, benevolence, courage, and strictness <sup>11</sup> Sun Tzu also adds that "it is essential for a general to be tranquil and obscure, upright and self-disciplined .He alters his management of affairs and changes his strategies to keep other people from recognizing them"<sup>12</sup> He believes that the general should never reveal his plans or intentions to the s troops Though Sun Tzu did not provide the detail that Clausewitz provided in describing his attributes of military genius, the two lists coincide in general. Since the two lists closely correlate, it is not necessary to elaborate on each of the attributes in this section. Sun Tzu's attributes, however, did not preclude any particular group of people from possessing the qualities of a great commanding general Sun Tzu's descriptions are more frustratingly abstract in their presentation

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<sup>11</sup> Sun Tzu Art of War trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), 167

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 222

Sun Tzu's collective umbrella of the all-knowing commander is certainly befitting of Shaka. Shaka possessed the wisdom to know when and when not to fight, when to go on offense and defense, he understood the terrain; and he relied on intelligence to learn as much about the enemy as possible. Shaka's final battle with the Ndwandwe rather poignantly highlights his ability to change his strategies to keep the enemy off balance. Shaka did not subscribe to the idea of keeping his plans and intentions a secret.

## Conclusion

Shaka of the Zulu revolutionized warfare for the Zulu and other African clans. He was a master strategist and tactician. Shaka's ability to envision the potential of the stabbing spear along with his innovations of the larger shield and bull horns formation derived from his intellect. The discipline he instilled in his troops rivaled any army. By any measure, Shaka possessed the essence of military genius. Based on the fact that Clausewitz began to revise his initial thoughts on war because of his realization that the dynamics of war had changed since his original "manuscript," one can only hope that news of the great warrior Shaka of the Zulu would have given this esteemed scholar reason to pause and reassess his position on "savages" possessing military genius.



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